

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2005 Conference Proceedings (Athens, GA)

Principles of Adult Education at Work in an Early Women's Prison: The Case of the Massachusetts Reformatory, 1930-1960

Dominique T. Chlup
Texas A&M University, USA

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Chlup, Dominique T. (2005). "Principles of Adult Education at Work in an Early Women's Prison: The Case of the Massachusetts Reformatory, 1930-1960," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2005/papers/48>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Principles of Adult Education at Work in an Early Women's Prison: The Case of the Massachusetts Reformatory, 1930-1960

Dominique T. Chlup
Texas A&M University, USA

Abstract: *This paper discusses the role and significance of adult education principles as espoused by an early corrections official Austin MacCormick and how his philosophy and aim of adult education for prisoners relates to the educational programs and practices implemented at the Massachusetts Reformatory for Women during the 1930s, 40s, and 50s.*

Introduction

In the field of correctional education, it is often joked that if correctional education is the “neglected child” of corrections, it is the “illegitimate child” of education (Brown-Young, 1986). The field of “education” being referred to here is the field of adult education as opposed to K-12 or higher education. Adult education (or the educating of adults) itself is a profession that arguably suffers from a marginalized and stigmatized status, so it is not surprising that correctional education within that field falls even farther outside the periphery. The obvious reason for this is the fact that prisoners in the United States represent some of the most marginalized and stigmatized of human beings. And while, historians of adult education have looked at the intellectual roots of the movement, little scholarship has been devoted to the nexus between the history of correctional education and its relationship to the adult education movement. One way to begin to rectify this void is to begin to provide the narrative history of the origins, development, and significance of early correctional education programs and the individuals who informed those programs and their relationship to the field of adult education. It is hoped that this paper will begin to do that work. The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, it will briefly identify the adult education principles espoused by Austin MacCormick for educating prisoners. Second, the paper will focus specifically on a case where we see these principles in practice—the Massachusetts Reformatory for women at Framingham.

Austin MacCormick and Adult Education for Prisoners

Austin MacCormick ([1931] 1976) once wrote, “Education is not the universal solvent although it is an excellent catalyzer (p. 1). He feared that society restlessly and fruitlessly sought a single formula for the solution of crime. According to him, members of society incorrectly put all their hopes on education to be that single formula. He felt that the solution for crime, if one could ever be found, would come from a search in every field of human knowledge, not the social sciences alone, and certainly not rest in the terrain of any one agency, such as education. As Glenn Frank wrote in the *Journal of Adult Education*, “The mere tools of education are no guaranty of character. A man may carry a kit of burglar’s tools and a doctor’s degree at the same time” (Frank, 1929, p. 23).

Yet MacCormick refused to believe that there were no benefits to be gained from educating prisoners. In fact, for him, the crux of the matter when it came to prisoners and education lay someplace between Glenn Frank’s statement and the belief that education could single handedly cure crime. For MacCormick ([1931] 1976) “...the tools of education, while no guaranty of character, are a powerful aid in forming and transforming it [character]; that education of prisoners offers one of the very real hopes for their rehabilitation” (p. 2).

MacCormick was quick to surmise that while it was true a man and/or woman may carry a burglar's kit and a doctor's kit at the same time, it was equally as true that s(he) may carry a plumber's kit and a doctor's degree, but this is seldom the case. To paraphrase MacCormick, there is a vast difference between the person who turns to crime when s(he) is educated and the person who turns to education when s(he) is a criminal.

Mark Twain once expressed that there had probably been more said about educating prisoners and less done about it than anything else in the United States. Austin MacCormick in the 1930s decided to do something more than just research and talk about it; he proposed a program for educating adult prisoners. Between November 1927 and August 1928, MacCormick visited all but three of the prisons and reformatories for men and women in the United States. He had been to almost all of them at least once before. After all, his position as Assistant Director of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons dictated that he remain on the pulse of the country's correctional facilities. Supported by grants from the Carnegie Corporation to the National Society of Penal Information (MacCormick was Director of the Society at the time of the survey), he surveyed a 110 institutions nationwide and enough road camps and prison farms in the South "to give a fair picture of each state prison system as a whole" ([1931] 1976, p. ix).

The work fell largely to MacCormick because not only was he the director of the National Society of Penal Information at the time, but also because he had been a "name" in the field of corrections for decades. MacCormick shortly after undertaking the project realized that the education work in the penal institutions of the country was so limited that his task truly lay in not recording what was being done but instead to formulate a workable program, indicating the possibilities of what might be done with sufficient financial support and competent personnel. The resulting study became his book *The education of adult prisoners: A survey and a program*.

In the field of corrections, Austin MacCormick's cumulative impact is immeasurable (Burns, 1976). He served as consultant at one time or another to most state correctional agencies in the U.S. He was commissioner of the NYC Department of Corrections, a professor of criminology at Berkeley, Director of the Osborne Association, in addition to at one time being the Assistant Director of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons. He even received from President Nixon in March of 1971 a special commendation "in recognition of exceptional service to others" (Burns, 1976 preface to MacCormick, [1931] 1976, n.p.).

And while he closely aligned himself with the field of adult education, he remains a largely obscured and understudied figure in the field. He first allied himself with the field of adult education when he wrote, "Education for prisoners must be 'adultized.' ...Prison education must, moreover, be conceived as adult in the sense conveyed by the use of this term in the adult education movement. It must aim at the 'enrichment of self' as well as at the imparting of utilitarian knowledge and skill" (MacCormick, [1931] 1976, p. 10). Arguably, MacCormick, was one of the first correctional educators to advocate for adult education theories, techniques, principles, and methods to be applied in the educational programs and practices of U.S. prisons. He argued that while it was true prisoners may have to study subjects that others mastered in childhood, this was not an excuse to use juvenile texts, equipment or methods with adult prisoners.

Grounded in the tenets of progressivism, MacCormick advocated an approach to educating adult prisoners that was similar to that of the professional organization that originally recommended the funding for his project, the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE), the name changed in the 1980s to the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE). AAAE's early orientation was toward "diffusing knowledge and

promoting democracy” (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 60). This orientation was evident in the philosophy and aim MacCormick espoused for adult prisoners. The philosophy was to consider the prisoner first as an adult in need of education and only secondarily as a criminal in need of reform. The aim of education for adult prisoners was “to extend to prisoners as individuals every type of educational opportunity that experience or sound reasoning shows may be of benefit or interest to them, in the hope that they may thereby be fitted to live more competently, satisfyingly and cooperatively as members of society” ([1931] 1976, p. 12).

Principles of Adult Education in a Prison

While MacCormick’s study found that the educational programs for men in the country were severely lacking, he found the reverse to be true of several of the programs he found at the women’s reformatories. He felt that “from the standpoint of education in the broadest sense, the reformatories for women are the most hopeful of all our American penal institutions. ...In the educational work, which is the backbone of the institution’s program, they are given academic and vocational education closely related to their real needs and interests” ([1931] 1976, p. 292).

MacCormick’s description told the story of how a model reformatory should operate and the following are the adult education principles he espoused. He believed that prisoners deserved education not because they were incarcerated but because they were undereducated. He felt that education would enrich the lives of prisoners allowing them to return to society as more productive, responsible, and involved citizens, and that “the responsibility for education was not solely in the hands of teachers but was shared by the entire institution” (Hunsinger, 1987, p. 160). He interpreted education in its broadest sense to include academic, vocational, health, social, and cultural learning. His primary belief about inmate education was the need for individualization in all aspects of the program, and education for inmates should not just be about practicality and usefulness, but rather inmates should be encouraged to pursue education purely for the intellectual and esthetic value.

MacCormick felt that aiming to make inmates better citizens was a defensible aim but one that was too low. Instead he felt that a better citizen should have “new ways of living, new competence not only in making a living but also in the complex social relationships of modern life, new understanding, new satisfactions, new richness, new outlooks, new horizons, new standards, new concepts” ([1931] 1976, p. 6).

He felt that even if society accepts that prison education be based on the theory of reforming inmates, the path of reform must be a broad, winding, and rambling one, with several detours and alluring bypaths. In his survey of adult prison education programs, he indicated that they failed for many reasons. Mainly, that they lacked clear goals, adhered too rigidly to public school methods, failed to individualize programs, had inadequately trained teachers, and, most significantly, lacked funding. He stressed that prison education programs should be of the same type and quality found in adult education programs operating outside of prisons rather than simply feeding juvenile instruction to adult inmates. MacCormick stressed that the most successful prison education programs operated under a premise of teaching inmates subjects out of interest rather than compulsion.

The Case of the Massachusetts Reformatory for Women at Framingham

When one looked at the reformatory Dr. Miriam Van Waters was striving to operate, it seemed as if the pages from MacCormick’s book could be laid out upon her desk, reminding her daily of her task. It did not matter to Van Waters that others felt the tide had turned away from the prison reform movement and now ebbed in new directions of national reform. Her concern

remained in the uplift and education of her students. Having previously worked with juvenile girls, Van Waters also realized that her task with the women inmates was different. Their educational needs were different. This understanding is perhaps one of the reasons why MacCormick's work informed the educational programs and practices at the reformatory.

Upon accepting her new position as Superintendent of the Massachusetts Reformatory for Women at Framingham in 1932, Van Waters announced her goal was to "bring as many community interests into the situation as possible and to make the life within [the reformatory] as nearly as may be like the life without [outside the reformatory]" (*Los Angeles Record*, 1932, n.p.). One way she felt to achieve this was to remove the bars from the windows. On May 11, 1932, she asked that the bars be removed from the windows of the hospital's resident physician's office and that they be carefully stored as she thought they could be used in various parts of the garden for vine trellis (Reid, 1957, p. 6). She sought to create as non-prison-like an atmosphere as possible.

Framingham's Unique Educational Programs: "A Reformatory should be a Place like a School"

In 1935, the Framingham superintendent's report documented that out of 296 women inmates 250 were enrolled in the voluntary school classes (Van Waters, 1935). By 1940, twenty-six classes were offered. This number would continue to grow into the late 1950s and included classes in the visual arts, beginner's English, poetry, biology, typing, Bible study, metal craft, arithmetic, folk dancing, and a Biography class run by the superintendent's mother. This did not include the correspondence courses, which were procured for the University Extension Division of the State Department of Education nor did it include the various clubs (Cox, Bixby & Root, 1933, p. 367). In a span of twenty-five years (1932-1957) nearly 90 different classes would be offered and 14 different clubs. All of the clubs met weekly and were designated for specific purposes. For instance, the 36 members of the Merry Makers Club were all African Americans, whose purpose in meeting was to "encourage the interest of the members in the leaders in their race—books are read about the lives of outstanding [Black] men and women" (Row, 1939, p. 1). Other clubs included the Garden Club, Glee Club, Barn Club, Parole Club, the Birthday Club, the Good Fellowship Club, the Mothercraft Club, Junior Council, and the Two-Sided Club, members who were elected from the student body to debate and discuss with Dr. Van Waters administrative and institutional changes they wished to see happen at Framingham.

The Educational Mission of the Reformatory stated that the basic principle of the Educational Department was to give the students as varied an educational program as possible. Courses were to be offered in art, literature, religious instruction, music, occupational therapy, manual arts, physical education, and vocational training. The goal of the department was to stimulate "an interest for greater learning which will enable them [the inmates] to live more co-operatively in social groups and general community life, as well as affording them the opportunity of competing more efficiently in the business world" (Weinberg, n.d). The rhetoric of this underlying principle aligns with the individualization of programming touted by MacCormick.

Ruth Weinberg (1948), the Director of the Education Department, cited four "purposes" for the inmates' education.

1. To furnish opportunity for further education, which may aid in future living and pleasure
2. To overcome illiteracy
3. To open entirely new fields of interest for those who may never have been exposed to such opportunity before

4. To provide worthwhile occupation of leisure time while the student is within the institution

Again, these “purposes” align closely with MacCormick’s principles for educating adult prisoners. We even see this alignment in Superintendent Van Waters’ Annual Reports. In her 1936 Annual Superintendent’s Report she states the goals of modern penology are to teach self-discipline and responsible citizenship (Van Waters, 1936, p. 52). Education was seen as one of the vehicles through which to accomplish these goals.

The students at Framingham often spoke glowingly of the educational opportunities they were afforded at the Reformatory. One inmate whose piece “Frustration, or...” appeared in the *Harmony News*, Framingham’s student-run and produced news magazine and literary journal (the piece was then reprinted in the men’s prison magazine *Agricola*) described how the reformatory acted as a place where she could receive an education that she would not have received otherwise.

Now that I am here, I have completed a short story course, two years of English, and a short course in Basic Psychiatry. I would never have taken the time to do this outside, and through doing these things, I have found that I can do things I never knew I could do. (1954, n.p.)

Since the educational programs were not compulsory, except for in the cases of “illiterates,” the Education Department was proud that they maintained an average of 75-80% of all the women participating in some portion of the program (Weinberg, n.d.). Given the variety of choices, it was easy for inmates to find at least one course they wanted to take. The curriculum was not set, but instead, Director Weinberg changed the classes from year-to-year based on student interest and teaching staff availability (Weinberg, 1948). What was consistent from year-to-year was the value placed on education: “We stress education from the time of the introductory class, which is a form of orientation while students are in isolation, until the day the student leaves the institution” (Weinberg, n.d., n.p.).

Not only was education in terms of classes stressed, but the department endeavored “to use all of the teaching potentialities of our staff and student body, thus providing a well rounded, integrated program of wide variety” (Weinberg, n.d., n.p.) This meant that inmates did teach their own classes. For example, one inmate taught a painting on glass class. Not only was it an educational endeavor, it was a profitable one as the inmates sold their own wares: “The activity is set up on the same financial basis as the weaving; that is, it is self-supporting, does work by order, using donated materials or those brought with profit from sales” (Callahan, 1948, n.p.). The inmates initiated and responded to the curriculum as they saw fit.

Students took on several unique leadership roles in the reformatory. For instance, they ran the monthly student assemblies at which students from each of the reformatory’s departments gave progress reports. Experiments in self-government were another of the principles advocated by MacCormick. They also wrote and produced their own plays. Dramatics, were one of the pieces of “cultural education” advocated by MacCormick ([1931] 1976, pp. 199-200). One such play, “Reunion,” performed in June of 1948, was a portrayal of institution life from the day of admission to the day of discharge. The play was written with the larger community in mind. Students invited members of the community to the play and used it as a teaching performance, offering community members the chance to see institutional life from the prisoner’s perspective. One visitor, Irja Kanttii, a European visitor from Finland, likened the student run assemblies to those found at any American college. Kanttii was truly impressed by the authentic educational experience she found happening at Framingham. She would echo MacCormick’s very

sentiments that there was much of value to be learned from the Framingham example for at its core was a belief that inmates were students first and foremost an adult education principle that MacCormick clearly advocated.

Conclusion

This paper looked at the example of one individual Austin MacCormick and the program he developed for educating adult prisoners. This paper stressed that the principles of adult education that he espoused are closely aligned to those of the professional organization AAAE that recommended a study of educational work in prisons and reformatories be undertaken. The second half of this paper dealt with the case of the Massachusetts Reformatory for Women and how the principles advocated by MacCormick were reflected in the educational programs and practices put into place at that particular reformatory. This paper is simply a start to the telling of these stories as much more needs to be explored in terms of the nexus between the field of correctional education and the field of adult education. Indeed, it was hoped that this paper would simply be a start.

References

- Brown-Young, C. (1986). *Deconstructing correctional education: An ethnographic study of the contexts of prisons schools*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University.
- Burns, H. (1976). Preface. *The education of adult prisoners: A survey and a program*. By Austin MacCormick. New York: AMS Press. (Original work published 1931).
- Callahan Report. (1948). Painting on glass, inmate teacher. In Miriam Van Waters papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Harvard University. Cambridge, MA.
- Cox, W.B., Bixby, L., & Root, W. (Eds.), *Handbook of American prisons and reformatories volume I, 1933*. New York: Osborne Association, National Society of Penal Information, and the Welfare League Association.
- Early marriages are discouraged. (1932 January 7). *Los Angeles Record*.
- Frank, G. (1920). On the firing line of democracy: Adult education takes its place there. *Journal of Adult Education* 1(1), 23-28. Cited in MacCormick, A. (1976). *The education of adult prisoners: A survey and a program*. New York: AMS Press. (Original work published 1931).
- Frustration, or. (1954). In Miriam Van Waters Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Harvard University. Cambridge, MA.
- Hunsinger, I. (1987). Austin MacCormick [sic] and the education of adult prisoners: Still relevant today. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 48(4), 160-165.
- MacCormick, A. (1976). *The education of adult prisoners: A survey and a program*. New York: AMS Press. (Original work published 1931).
- Merriam, S., & Brockett, R. (1997). *The profession and practice of adult education: An introduction*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Reid, A. (1957 October). The education of the inmate. *Harmony News*, 6.
- Row, A. P. (1939). Framingham Reformatory Clubs. In Amy Paddon Row's papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Harvard University. Cambridge, MA.
- Van Waters, M. (1935). Reformatory for women at Framingham. In Amy Paddon Row papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Harvard University. Cambridge, MA.
- Van Waters, M. (1936). *Superintendent's Annual Report for the Year Ending 1936*. Boston, MA: Department of Corrections.
- Weinberg, R. (n.d.). Education. In Miriam Van Waters papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University. Cambridge, MA.
- Weinberg, R. (1948). Callahan Report. In Miriam Van Waters papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Harvard University. Cambridge, MA.